

BOOK TWO OF THE CELTIC PROPHECY

RELIQUARY'S CHOICE

by
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Can't Put It Down Books

Reliquary's Choice
Book Two of The Celtic Prophecy
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*This book is dedicated to my husband, Donald,
my very own romantic Scottish hero.*

*Have faith,
even when things look the bleakest,
there is always a choice.*

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Prologue

THE WICKED EDGE of the curved blade glinted in the meager light shed by the candles. Cormac hardened himself against the revulsion and fear of the Oracle's feather-light touch. The popping of stitches, a sharp *burrup*, rent the air. He'd have torn the shirt off over his head if he did not know that it would destroy her ability to scry for Sinclair and the would-be priestess. He wrestled with his will to keep his composure when she was so near. He fought to maintain his breathing, fought against the shaking and increased heartbeat. He could not reveal his vulnerability. He knelt so she could lift the remnants of the shirt off his shoulders as if it were some holy artifact.

The Oracle's dead eye rounded on him. He didn't know if she could see out of it, but it was unnerving. The white sclera, still oozing mucus, pinned him to the spot. He had no choice but to focus on it.

“Ye fear me, Master Bard. As well ye should.”

Cormac gulped, his mouth devoid of saliva.

“I will ha' their location soon. Prepare yer acolytes. We willnae be thwarted again.”

Chapter 1

OCTOBER 1982

Brenawyn,

My lovely child.

I'm set upon a course from which there is no return. I have pitted myself against your father. Find it in your heart to forgive me. Someday.

I have dreams. Terrible dreams. Prophetic visions more like. Headaches—migraines with searing pain, followed by nose bleeds, dreams, blacking out, vomiting. I have never had visions before. I don't know of anyone who has. I am afraid to ask, in case it gets back to him, your father.

These dreams, filled with blood and pain, seeing people slaughtered, sacrificed. Blurred images of a hunt. No leads though. They don't seem to know where to start. Hunting throughout the years, throughout the centuries. Doesn't make sense. But I feel they are hunting for you.

Choices to be made.

I haven't helped. I haven't prepared you. I've hindered and perhaps I've signed your death certificate. Did a botched job of binding your magic. Should have consulted Mom, your grandmother. She wouldn't have done it. Too late.

I have seen a glimmer. Only if you choose the right path the world will be yours. Not in the clichéd way, but you're meant for bigger things. You weren't supposed to be born now. Or to me.

*You're out of place, lost in the universe.
I'm begging.
Choose to live.*

Slamming the book closed, Brenawyn slapped it on the nightstand and vaulted off the bed. She felt like a bee in a jar. Trapped. Waiting. She had thought that reading her mother's diary would take her mind off of things she couldn't understand, but yet reading had brought it all home. Her mother, if she hadn't been crazy, had seen visions. Did Brenawyn believe in that? What did the Church say about that?

Brenawyn shook her head to clear it. "You were off your rocker, lady." She looked around the room for distraction. She spied the boxes she'd hauled from Jersey to her grandmother's store in Salem and now to the farmhouse in the New York countryside where she had taken refuge. She wrestled one of the boxes down from the closet shelf and hefted it to the bed. She never thought she'd admit it, but thinking about her dead husband Liam was preferable to worrying about Druid lore, visions and prophecies, and of course, the Order, an ancient group of Druids who seemed to have gotten her confused as the central character in some ancient prophecy.

When she lifted the lid mustiness wafted out, the box had been stored for the three years since Liam had died in a car accident in New Jersey. The smell made her crinkle her nose. A fat envelope lay on the top with photographs spilling out. She picked them up, recognizing the first Christmas she and Liam had shared together. The camera caught Liam in the middle of laughing at something; she couldn't recall what. She'd always loved his smile, she thought, running her finger lovingly over the photo. It was what had attracted her to him at the first. He had a stern face, but when he smiled; oh Lord, he had a smile that would make an old woman blush.

Brenawyn leafed through the photos. There were pictures of their honeymoon to Niagara Falls, pictures of their house, even before and after shots of the renovations to the living room.

Familiar faces of friends peered out from the surfaces in chronological order, the organization did not surprise her; Liam had always forced orderliness on life. Yes, they were all in order except for two pictures that were stuffed into the middle of the stack; pictures Brenawyn had never seen before.

In the first, Liam cradled a pretty blonde in his arms. The picture captured the woman's reaction, a hearty laugh at whatever Liam whispered in her ear, his mouth so close to her neck. The other picture showed the same woman sprawled on a blanket, a magnolia blossom in her hair.

Brenawyn looked down at the corner of the photo for a digital date imprinted by the camera. Her mouth went dry. There had to be a mistake. The date read April 2011, more than two years after Brenawyn and Liam married.

Brenawyn covered the pictures, willing them to disappear. But now that she had seen them she had to look again, no matter how reluctantly. Almost blinded by tears, she uncovered them again to examine them and try to determine the identity of the woman. No, she'd never seen her before. She wasn't some friend or acquaintance of theirs; they hadn't been taken at some innocent party or neighborhood get-together that Brenawyn could remember.

The way Liam, her husband, was looking at this blonde-haired woman was just...Brenawyn threw the pictures in the trashcan beside the bed. *I won't even think about it. What good would it do? Rage at the possibility that Liam had an affair? Now, three years after he is gone? He never gave me any reason to doubt him.* Disgusted with herself she grabbed the can and tore into the trash, finding the glossy surfaces and stormed out to the living room to dispose of them. She found a match, touched it to the photos, and after watching the flame take hold, tossed the pictures into the empty fireplace.

Ashes.

Appropriate.

She stormed away but returned just as quickly to watch the last of the embers wink out. She stood there, silently considering

the incriminating, albeit circumstantial, evidence. “Ugh. Damn it!” She slammed her hand on the mantle. “Do you even know that he’s dead?”

“Is everything a’richt, *a chuisle*?” She turned to find Alex sitting in the leather wing chair in the shadowed recess of the room, book on his knee.

Brenawyn’s breath hitched as she sighed. “Unpacking the last of the boxes from the house I shared with my husband.” She glanced back at the fireplace, “I found some pic...some unexpected things,” she amended.

“Ah lass, dae ye want ta talk about it?”

“No, thank you. I’d rather forget it all together.”

A few steps into the hall took her back to the bedroom door where she stopped when she saw garbage strewn on the floor and her dog, Spencer, crouched in the corner, chewing a used tissue. “Spencer, put that down!” The dog bolted but Brenawyn wrestled him to the ground, prying his mouth open enough to extract his treat. “Mine!” She held the wet tissue aloft.

Sitting up, Brenawyn looked around her bedroom, now strewn with the contents of the remaining boxes from her former home.

Three years. Three years. If I close my eyes...picking up the phone to hear...seeing the wrecked guard rail, the car...Ugh. Time doesn’t heal shit.

Brenawyn reached over for the box of tissues on the nightstand and patted the bed beside her, “Come here, boy. Come on up.”

She caught the eighty-pound bundle of wriggling fur. Not content with either licking her face or being as close to her as possible, Spencer did both simultaneously. “Eww, no doggie kisses.” She scratched him under his collar. “Who’s a good boy?” The dog tried one more time to sneak a last minute kiss that barely missed her open mouth, before giving up and settling down with a grunt as he nestled in, molding his body to her side. Absently she petted him, “You didn’t know Liam. He was a good man, even though he was allergic to dogs.”

The next item in the box was a small notebook filled with her

husband's tight neat script. She leafed through it before recognizing what it was—the notebook that they shared when they took the philosophy class together during their last year of college. How she managed to get an A in the class was still a mystery to her when all she was concerned with was the heat of his body as he sat next to her.

She pulled out the insurance papers she had seen too often. “Again? How many copies did you keep? Did you think I would forget where they were?” she said aloud. She could almost hear his voice. *This is where copies of the insurance papers and the keys to the safety deposit box are...* “How many times did we argue over this?”

Brenawyn dropped the papers, pushed the box across the bed and flung herself back on it, startling the dog. She didn't move until she felt his wet nose nuzzle her arm. “It's okay, Spencer. Talking to you is one thing, but talking to the dead husband...I need to stop that.”

Resolved to finish, she picked up the box and extracted the last item in the container, a small wooden box. Brenawyn ran her hand along the ornate brass fittings. Locked. She upended the box. No key. “Hmm.” Running her hands along the back revealed a weak hinge. She tried prying the hinge with the edge of her fingernail only to be thwarted when her nail broke. Sucking on the injured finger, she unfolded herself from the bed, climbed over the unmoving dog and searched among the items strewn on the floor for the screwdriver she had seen earlier.

The hinges gave little resistance to the flathead screwdriver. Reaching in, Brenawyn took out a brightly wrapped gift box complete with a silver Mylar bow, flattened now after so long. She put the box on the nightstand, hesitant to open it. Liam had always been giving her surprise gifts. Packing his things away had been filled with the pain of finding boxes and gift bags he had obviously stowed away to give her at some future date. *Or had he meant them for that other woman?* The thought came unbidden to her mind, but she dismissed it quickly. It was unfair to Liam. It was just that it had been so long since the last time she stumbled upon a

surprise like this from a man long dead.

~ ~ ~

Alex paced the room, but Brenawyn didn't return. Keeping an ear to the hallway, he strode over to the fireplace and sifted through the ashes. A soot covered portion of a photo lay in the debris. Should he look at it? He hesitated. The photo had obviously disturbed Brenawyn. He didn't want to pry into her private life, but considering the dangers they still faced, it seemed necessary.

He stopped and plucked the photo from the fireplace, turning it over in his hand to see the two faces there. He drew a surprised breath. He should have expected this. Centuries may have passed, but Alex would always remember the face of James Morgan. Hatred boiled up from his gut; he needed to hit something.

He got some satisfaction as the brittle paper crumbled in his fist. He wished it were that easy. Jamie never gave him the opportunity. Coward.

I found some unexpected things. He paused. Was Jamie her husband? *No, it cannae be.* She had always called him Liam. A common enough name; he had never connected it with James Liam Morgan McAllister.

Damn him.

He needed to hit something.

Always one step ahead.

A soft cry from the hallway pulled him back into the present and he flexed his clenched fist.

Alex stopped at the open doorway to see Brenawyn reaching for a wrapped gift on the nightstand. She fumbled with the paper, ripping at the seams with her teeth until the box was dented. She found purchase and wiped the bit of paper from her lip with one hand as the other peeled the paper away to reveal a black velvet jewelry box. Closing her eyes and holding her breath, she opened the box. He couldn't see what was inside but the facets of the stones spread sparkles across the ceiling as it caught the first rays of the day.

Brenawyn carefully removed the necklace and held it up. Dangling the medallion from its chain as she approached the

mirror, she traced the detailed design. She looped it around her neck letting the medallion fall between her breasts.

“Years later I’m still finding stuff you left for me? This is why I couldn’t live there anymore. I’m trying to move on with my life.”

It was only then that she saw him in the doorway. She jumped. “Jesus, you scared me.”

“Lass, wha’s wrong? Is thaur anything I can dae ta help?”

“It’s nothing.” Sniffing and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand so hard that she saw spots. “My husband...” shaking her head, “my late husband would give me things, presents, jewelry and other pretty things.” She carried the medallion to him, “Three years after his death, I am still finding gifts.”

She dropped the necklace in his open hand and whirled to gather the rest of the items back into the box. An exquisite medallion of gold Celtic knot work with ruby, sapphire, emerald, diamond, and topaz gemstones glinted up from his palm. He knew this necklace, could trace the pattern from memory if he needed more proof to convince him of what he already knew.

“T’is verra beautiful. It reminds me o’ another. Come haur. Thaur is something...” Brenawyn straightened and met him, “I am curious about.” He looped the necklace around her head lifting her hair so the chain fell again her skin. He stepped back and looked unsatisfied, “The medallion needs ta be in contact with yer skin,” and he went to make it so. Brenawyn pulled away blushing, his fingertip losing contact with her collar.

“Ok, I’ll do it, thank you.” And she dropped the medallion in her cleavage. “This is very strange. Necklaces are supposed to be worn outside...”

“Humor me.” His face must have given something away because her eyes grew wide. “Turn around and leuk in the mirror.”

Her reflection showed glowing sigils across her clavicle, dimming slightly across her shoulders to almost nothing as they tracked down her upper arms. He saw recognition reflected in her eyes. He knew she was remembering his explanation, “It is called Interlace; its path represents the thread o’ life eternal, the crossings between the spiritual world o’ Tir-Na-Nog and our own.”

These were the same iridescent markings as were present the after her recitation of the Lughnasa thanksgiving incantation in Salem. Alex came up behind her and held her about the waist and the dimmed tracings burst to life, racing down her arms in matching intensity.

“What does this mean?” as she searched his face reflected in the mirror.

“The necklace, or rather the medallion, the chain has nay power, is *Eiliminteach*, it means elemental. It is a mythic piece, one o’ five, drenched in Druid lore. Five pieces, scattered, hidden, until the one is revealed. Foci most powerful for the priestess just as the torc is for the Shaman.

“Why are my markings activated by it? And why do they glow brighter at your touch?”

“The medallion is a sort o’ antenna ta focus your abilities.” Eyes burning with desire, he swept aside her tresses and dipped his head so his lips brushed her ear. “My touch is different...are ya sure ye want ta ken, Brenawyn?”

She turned to face him and stepped back to look into his eyes, careful not to touch him.

“We are two halves ta a whole,” he continued. “Shaman, priestess, man, woman, yin, yang, if ye will; we represent balance, and because o’ that balance, the gods favor our union.”

“If it is as you say, why would my husband have it amongst his belongings?”

Everything stopped as the weight of her words beat on his heart. “I ken yer husband a while sin.” The words were out of his mouth before the decision to tell her registered in his mind. How he would explain his connection to James, he had no clue. The truth? Hadn’t she had enough of that?

Brenawyn looked at him, mouth agape. “How... how did you know Liam?”

“He never deserved yer loyalty. He wasna a kind man.”

“What? You knew him?” Her arms uncrossed so that the robe gaped open. “When?”

“Brenawyn, I shouldnae ha’ mentioned it. T’was a long time

ago. Perhaps he changed.”

“No. Tell me what he was like when you knew him. Please.”

“T’was a long time ago. Please. Ye ha’ good memories o’ him. Mine aren’t so. I’d rather no’ say.”

She moved to bar the door, “No, damn it. Tell me.”

“Liam and I were friends. I ken him as Jamie—James Liam Morgan McAllister. It doesna matter now. A woman came between us. We weren’t friends any longer. End o’ story.” Alex brushed by her on his way out of the room, knowing that she was right on his heels.

“Your story lacks detail.” Brenawyn caught his arm, “Please, tell me. It’s been three years; I can’t get over his death. My memories are fading but instead of making it better and allowing me to move on, I feel anxious and panicked, as if there is something important that I’ve forgotten, but I can’t recall it.”

“Brenawyn, if ye’ll agree ta let it wait, I’ll tell ye everything in time.”

The back door opened with a squeak and Spencer bolted through the room, stepping on Brenawyn’s bare foot. She hobbled, hopping on one foot; Alex grabbed her forearm to keep her from falling.

“Brenawyn, yer question, ask yerself this, why would he ha’ the *Eiliminteach*?”

She stared at him for a moment before silently leaving the room.

Alex softly closed the door behind him, “Why, Jamie? Damn ye.” He could have lived with the betrayal; eventually he would have stopped hating them so much if it had been true. Perhaps it was on her part. He’d never know after what Jamie had done to her. Now here he was centuries later with another woman whose memories were violated and altered by the same depraved animal.

Damn him.

All for power.

Not this time.

Alex would give Brenawyn the truth even if she hated him as a result.

Jamie—Liam was dead.
It was time the façade died too.

Chapter 2

LEO AVOIDED THE HOUSE—too many memories—but she loved the land. It called to her. The grove was a distance away from the house and the road beyond it, further out into the woods where she could shut out the human noises: a loud engine of some old jalopy wheezing by or what passed for music at an ear-bleeding decibel. When Tom had cleared the land—manually at her insistence—many of the oak and cedar trees had been young, but they flourished with more room to grow, their branches threading together over time. She added others over the years: a willow by the stream, then birch, elm, silver fir, rowan, more than she could remember. It was a peaceful, sacred place.

She placed the canvas bag in the center of the grove, taking out the ceramic bowl, a jar, and her mortar and pestle. She was unhurried in her preparations. Taking a knife, she went to the birch tree, peeling some of the exfoliating bark away. This was the first ingredient, appropriate for new beginnings and a cleansing of the past, something she should have done from the start. So much time had been wasted. If only she could go back...but that was a fool's dream. She knew why she had done it. She had made ignoring the obvious an art form. She had lived with the lie for so long that she had convinced herself that there was nothing otherworldly about Brenawyn.

She put the bark deep in her pocket and continued to the elm. She cut a low hanging branch, divested it of its leaves and

placed it to join the birch bark. She looked at the tree. Funny how she took from it today as she had in the past: strength of will to save her unborn granddaughter so many years ago, and now that same strength of will to teach her granddaughter the fundamentals of Druidism today.

She walked to the oak and placed her palms against the wide strength of its trunk. She gazed above to its strong branches reaching out to the heavens above. The leaves rustled in the breeze, a few falling at the unseen mark of the coming of winter. She gathered her skirt and cut a piece of the bark; a piece of its armor to give strength and courage to what needed to be done.

She heard Alex approach. She was pretty sure that this was intentional; he could move as silently as a wolf stalking its prey if he wanted to. He was coming to speak with her. Her mind was a jumble. She wanted him near so that he could put himself in harm's way again to protect Brenawyn, repeatedly if necessary. But she wanted to drive him from her place too. Willing the need for his protection away was not enough, though. She knew none of them could go back, so she had to come to terms with him and their situation, for which she had no one but herself to blame. Alex would take Brenawyn and she would likely never see her granddaughter again.

Leo busily redoubled her efforts and she didn't look up, wanted to look absorbed, when he stopped in front of her. He stood there for what seemed to be an interminable time, but then sighed and lowered himself to sit opposite her on the grass. He held his side as he did; that caught her attention, and her eyes rocketed to his face.

"I'd have thought you wouldn't have pain?"

"I dinnae suppose ye ha' had much experience with bringing someone back from the dead?"

"I...I don't."

"Just so then." Alex pressed his palm into his side and took a deep breath. "Thaur is always pain after. Doonae be worrit for me, it will pass in time."

"How much time?"

“Ah, that depends on the extent o’ the wounds. Normally, the pain would cripple a man new ta the resurrection process, but for yer intervention t’will cut down on recovery. I thank ye for that though t’was unnecessary, because my tolerance for pain is higher than that o’ mortal men. I assure ye that I will be able ta defend against any that come for her.”

“Like you did back in Salem?” Leo asked, disapproval clear in her voice.

“Aye. I ken that I let my guard doon. T’was a judgment call. I dinnae ken that Cormac would be so direct. That he would use the Oracle in such a direct way. They are desperate. They willnae catch me off guard again.”

Leo nodded, accepting his statement. “What’s next?”

Alex looked at her grimly, saying nothing.

“How long do you think we have? How do we prepare?”

“A couple o’ days a’ the most ta be safe. We ought ta be gone long before he tracks us haur. If the Oracle got wha’ she needs that won’t even buy us that much time.”

“I could run with Brenawyn and hide. There are places in the world we could do this. Places of extreme power to hide in plain sight as we did in Salem. We could go to New Orleans or Paris or Rome.”

“Leoncha, even if t’were possible, how far do ye think ye would get? What was the toll on ye, Leo, for yer intercession with my resurrection?”

“How did you know?”

Alex touched the hair at her temples and untucked the lock behind her ear, rubbing the graying strands together to show her. “I ha’ ne’er kent ye ta ha’ gray in yer hair.”

Leo took the hair from his opened hand and considered it.

“It happened almost immediately I would think,” he added.

“Yes, and I, um, I have lost... I lost control.”

“Control?”

She looked away and lowered her voice to a whisper, a tear running down her cheek, “My bladder...”

“Ah,” he reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze, “thaur is

a cruel price ta pay, always. I ken o' wha' I speak."

"Yes, I'd assume you are well-versed in this area."

"Ye are no longer a young woman, and while ye are a strong healer, that's all ye are. Ye cannae go up against the likes o' Cormac or the Vate. Ye doonae ha' that kind o' power."

"The other option is unthinkable. To let her go, let you take her. The uncertainty will surely kill me."

Alex took a pen knife from his back pocket and opened his right hand to the sky, slicing across his palm. When enough blood welled in his cupped palm, he turned his wrist to let it drip on the ground. "I haurby gi' my blood oath ta protect..."

"Are you insane? Don't you realize what you are doing?"

"Aye, Leo. Wha' else can I dae?"

"But, to take the blood oath alone? You'll be committing your soul."

"My soul?" Alex shook his head. "Leoncha, listen ta me. It doesna matter much wha' happens ta me, if she were ta die, or be seduced ta the Coven, all hope is lost. T'would destroy the balance, bring the Formor back ta this realm, and I dinnae kin what after that.

"But to bind yourself to her, you'll pine for her all the rest of your days."

"Dae ye love yer granddaughter so little then? Perhaps I ha' misunderstood. Can ye bare ta part with her knowing that ye cannae protect her?"

"Of course not!"

"Then let me, Leoncha. I am willing. I ken wha' a sacrifice yer making. Allow me ta promise all that I am ta dae that in yer place."

"But."

"No, Leo. I ha' already made up my mind. Ye cannae stop me."

"You will become *Gancanagh* if she doesn't return your affection and take the oath herself. Your altruism will turn against you, and transform you into a monster."

"I am already a monster."

"No, damn your eyes! Listen to me, Alexander Sinclair. You

must not do this. You will fall into depravity. You'll lure innocents to crave your attentions."

Alex laughed at this, "In another context, ta tell a man that he'd have women begging, clamoring for his attentions, aye that would ha' been the devil's own temptation ta a much younger version o' myself." He grew sober, shaking his head slowly, "T'is all but done. Dae no' worry, Leoncha, I will fight the urge ta dae so when I become *Gancanagh*." Alex looked up to the heavens, "Hear me. Hear me! All that I am, and all that I will be I pledge to Brenawyn McAllister, daughter of Margaret Farraday, granddaughter of Leoncha Callaghan. Furthermore, I haurby gi' my blood oath ta protect her as if she were my own. Her life is more sacred and more dear than my own, and if I am ta fail as her lover and protector, may I wander ceaselessly until the end o' time without the eternal reward."

Alex looked to Leo, "Say it."

"No. I won't."

"It cannae be done until it is witnessed. Say it. Thaur is any other way."

Leo sighed, "Alexander Sinclair's vow was heard and acknowledged both in this world and beyond. With his word and mine, his fate is eternally sealed. So mote it be."